

THE GAY HISTORY SERIES – Lesson #1

Roman Orgy *The Satyricon of Petronius (1st Century A.D.)*

[No one disputes that homosexuality has been around as long as people have been, although most of the famous figurers from the past that the homos claim were *gay* or *lesbo* were in fact no such thing, and would have been horrified and enraged at the allegation. Another historical misnomer is that homosexuality was accepted as normal in ancient Greece and Rome. A large part of this misconception stems from the unfortunate fact that possibly the oldest surviving work of extended prose fiction, almost long enough to be called a novel, features a bugger boy. This is the *Satyricon* of Petronius, who was later executed on the orders of the Emperor Nero, when he wasn't fiddling while Rome burned. – HAC]

Satyricon is a Latin work of fiction in a mixture of prose and poetry. It is believed to have been written by Gaius Petronius the Arbiter. As with the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, classical scholars often describe it as a “Roman novel”, without necessarily implying continuity with the modern literary form.

The surviving portions of the text detail the misadventures of the narrator, Encolpius, and his lover, a handsome sixteen year old boy named Giton. Throughout the novel, Encolpius has a hard time keeping his lover faithful to him as he is constantly being enticed away by others. (Homos seem to have been notoriously promiscuous even then.) *Satyricon* is also extremely important evidence for the reconstruction of what everyday life must have been like for the lower classes during the early Roman Empire.

Despite repeated denunciations from the Church for its obscenity and immorality, the text was copied throughout the Middle Ages, probably by faggot monks who were bugging their novices and who, like all homosexuals, jumped at a chance to perpetuate their little subculture and portray it as “normal.” In 1664 the first critical edition of *Satyricon*, which included Trimalchio's party, was put to print, through the efforts of Pierre Petit. *Satyricon* has been translated into several languages and is now considered a classic of Western literature. To be fair, this is understandable, because it is in fact one of the few surviving narratives of ordinary life in ancient Rome, as opposed to the boring memoirs of people like Julius Caesar and the political slander and scandalmongering of writers like Suetonius and Tacitus.

Because of the status of the extant original texts of *Satyricon*, i.e. missing and probably beyond recovery unless someone finds one sealed up in a jar in a Roman cave somewhere, the true intent of Petronius' novel is unknown. It may not be a pro-homosexual novel at all; it may be satire with a moral component, with no purpose but revenge for Nero's dismissal of Seneca. (Long story. Two thousand year old politics.)

The work is narrated by its central figure, Encolpius, a former gladiator. The surviving sections of the novel begin with Encolpius travelling with a companion and former lover named Ascyrtos, who has joined Encolpius on numerous escapades. Encolpius' slave, a boy named Giton, is apparently at Encolpius' lodging when the story begins. (Giton is constantly referred to as “brother” throughout the novel, thereby indicating that he is a catamite, although there are plenty more indications.)

In the first passage preserved, Encolpius is in a Greek town in Campania, perhaps Puteoli, where he is standing outside a school, railing against the Asiatic style and false taste in literature, which he blames on the prevailing system of declamatory education. His adversary in this debate is Agamemnon, a sophist, who shifts the blame from the teachers to the parents. Encolpius discovers that his companion Ascyrtos has left and breaks away from Agamemnon when a group of students arrive.

Encolpius locates Ascyrtos and then Giton, who claims that Ascyrtos made a sexual attempt on him. After some conflict, the three go to the market, where they are involved in a dispute over stolen property. Returning to their lodgings, they are confronted by Quartilla, a devotee of Priapus, who condemns their attempts to pry into the cult's secrets. The companions are seized by Quartilla and her maids, who overpower and sexually torture them, then provide them with dinner and engage them in further sexual activity. An orgy ensues and the sequence ends with Encolpius and Quartilla exchanging kisses while they

spy through a keyhole at Giton having sex with a virgin girl (there is a lot of bisexuality in the book); and finally sleeping together.

I won't go on with the convoluted plot, but as you can see, it sounds like a Roman version of a cheap porno movie where the hero and/or heroine is lured into all kinds of absurd sexual situations. It is known that the Romans had a primitive media, including a regular government newspaper called the *Gazette* which was circulated in hand copied form and also read out in the Forum and elsewhere by public criers, (including advertisements for the equivalent of Honest Lucius's Used Chariots, come on down to the Circus Maximus for the best deals in town!) and a thriving publishing industry. Roman publishers use dozens or hundreds of scribes to copy out popular scrolls. They even had an equivalent of print-per-order like I use for my Northwest novels.

Satyricon is actually fairly interesting reading if, like me, you can take it into stride and context and understand that it is not, in fact, a propaganda piece for homosexuality as such. It is simply a lurid potboiler from a time of ancient sleaze, and like most pulp fiction, it is exaggerated and should not be taken as an exact and accurate portrayal of everyday Roman life any more than a Mickey Spillane novel is typical of the 1950s or a Batman movie is typical of the 2000s.

The fact is that despite their orgiastic reputation, the ancient Romans were actually pretty sexually strait laced in many ways, homo and hetero as well. The Emperor Augustus exiled both his daughter and his granddaughter to small islands for adultery, and one of the incidents that lost Nero the loyalty of his Praetorian guard and led to his overthrow and forced suicide was his public "gay marriage" to his chariot driver, a beefy character named Sporus. When he realized all was lost, Nero had one of his friends kill him with a sword, but not before he had already executed the author of *Satyricon*. Talk about your bad reviews!